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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an attempt to improve student discipline in the public schools of Springfield, Illinois. First, it discusses briefly a needs assessment study of staff, citizens, and students. A more extensive discussion is then offered of the objectives of the project and how they were accomplished. Finally, the paper offers a midyear report of progress stating that, at least on a short term basis, some positive changes can be made through an effort to improve discipline. It suggests that a discipline improvement program be done on a large scale, that it be top priority for the district, and that leadership come from the top. (Author/LD)

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James K. Nighswander
Springfield, Illinois

(Presentation to be made at AASA -- Feb. 17, 1980)

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING A DISTRICT-WIDE DISCIPLINE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Background

I am happy to have this opportunity to talk with you today about an issue that is of concern to all of us gathered here. That issue is student discipline. It goes without saying that discipline is a very serious problem in our nation's schools. It is a rare school indeed which is immune to the discipline problem. We are almost all affected and I suspect that each and everyone of us here sense some urgency about the discipline problem for otherwise we would probably be spending our afternoon in pursuit of other pleasures.

Just how serious is the discipline problem in the schools? This, of course, depends on one's criteria for what constitutes a discipline problem, where you live and the type of community in which you live. But on a national scale discipline -- or the lack of it -- is perceived as the number one problem facing the public schools according to the annual Gallup Poll. For 10 of the 11 years the poll has been conducted, the public has rated discipline as our biggest problem in the public schools.

Further evidence of the magnitude of the discipline problem comes from national studies such as the "Safe Schools Study" sponsored by the National Institute of Education; the hearings of the Senate Subcommittee headed by Senator Bayh from Indiana; NEA and AFT research - NYSUT Study of Teacher Stress; the popular literature, i.e., Good Housekeeping, Reader's Digest, Parade Sunday Magazine; our own professional journals, most of which address the issue from time to time. The volume of literature is massive, and the statistics are staggering.

I am not going to spend a lot of time by citing figures to convince you that the problem is serious. It appears to be worsening, at least in some areas, and it is hurting us in many ways -- in the pocketbook, of course, but more importantly in human terms through loss of learning, personal injury, fear, stress, frustration, anger, lost opportunity, etc.

I come from Springfield, Illinois the capital city of the state -- located in central Illinois. We have a population of about 100,000 people with a school enrollment in the public schools of just under 16,000 students. My district is probably typical of most other districts its size across the nation. We serve a range of racial and socioeconomic groups. Because Springfield is the state capital, there are many office workers and government personnel - both elected and appointed. We have some industry with a sizable corresponding blue-collar population. Minorities represent about 20% of the total population.

When we think about the Springfield's of the nation or the Decatur's or Peoria's or Des Moines' or Indianapolis' or the hundreds of midsized communities across the land you typically do not have visions of discipline being "out-of-control". Generally, these views are reserved for the major urban areas -- Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Boston -- where crime, violence, attacks on teachers, and serious acts of vandalism make the news. We have very little of this. But we do have discipline problems that interfere with the on-going educational program of the district and impede the learning of serious-minded, well-behaved students. We rarely experience the serious crimes and disorder that

plague large city schools but we have our share of classroom disturbances, truancy, tardiness, disrespect for authority, alcohol and drug abuse, minor vandalism and fighting. These are the problems that consume so much of our time, energy and resources to combat.

Many of us, including myself when I was a high school principal, became hardened or calloused to these kinds of violations and misbehaviors. We didn't like it, we complained about it and we tried to deal with these things as they occurred. But the general feeling was that it was just an unpleasant part of the job in public school education in the 1970s and 1980s.

In order to explain how Springfield became involved in a discipline improvement project, I must start with the employment of our current Superintendent. Shortly after arriving in Springfield several years ago he made a series of visits to the schools to meet with faculty members individually and in groups. Among other things, he questioned teachers and principals about those things they perceived as good about our district and the things that were not so good -- that which needed changing. In a number of schools the same message was conveyed time and again. Teachers and principals expressed the need to do something about student conduct -- about the growing trend of misbehavior in our schools -- the absenteeism, fighting, insolence, disobedience, failure to abide by reasonable and simple rules, etc. Our staff was expressing the anger and frustration experienced by educators in public schools across the country. They were asking such questions as "Why do we have to put up with this kind of conduct?" "Why do we have to tolerate misbehavior from those we are there to help?" "Why do we allow a few disruptive students to interfere with the education of the majority?" Our people were telling us that it is

time for the district to do something about the discipline problem.

Not only were teachers giving us a message but in a more subtle form the community was telling us discipline was not as it should be. A survey based on Gallup's model was conducted in Springfield by a community organization. To the item on problems facing the public schools, discipline ranked only behind "finance" as the number one problem.

Based on the information obtained from the staff and community the Superintendent and Board of Education decided to take action. We were going to listen to our teachers, principals and citizens and make the effort to bring about improvement in student discipline in our schools. I was asked to head this effort. What I want to discuss with you this afternoon is what we did to address the discipline problem, how our program of discipline improvement is progressing and, for those of you who may be considering similar projects, I will offer a few suggestions you may find helpful.

Project Planning Activities

I began work on the project by meeting with a few of my colleagues to discuss a planning strategy for discipline improvement. The group concluded that a logical first step would be a needs assessment. Of course, we had information from the staff and community that suggested a problem with discipline but we had no information bearing on --

a) the seriousness of specific discipline infractions

b) causes of discipline infractions

c) effectiveness of existing techniques in coping with infractions

d) inservice needs of staff to improve skills in dealing with discipline

e) the perceptions of students and parents re: discipline (except the knowledge that in a general way citizens in our community ranked discipline as the #2 problem faced by the schools)

A needs assessment instrument was developed and subsequently administered to samples of staff, citizens and students in April of last year. While time does not permit a detailed analysis of the survey results, I would like to share with you some of the more important and interesting findings:

1. We found that 93% of teachers, 94% of administrators, 64% of citizens and 46% of students perceived student discipline to be a major problem in our schools. This confirmed what we suspected.
2. Further, we found that 97% of our teachers, 97% of the administrators, 71% of the citizens and 47% of the students felt that discipline improvement should be a top priority of the district.
3. We asked the four groups about the seriousness of various infractions and how effective schools were in coping with these infractions. Teachers, administrators and citizens felt that the most serious problem was -- "lack of respect for authority" -- 2nd was "disrupting a class" -- and 3rd was "absenteeism and truancy." Students rated "absenteeism truancy" and "alcohol and drug abuse" as the top two.
4. In terms of our effectiveness in dealing with infractions, respondents generally felt we were more ineffective than effective. (Part II of the Survey)

5. The section of the survey on "causes" of discipline infractions contained several interesting differences among groups. Teachers and administrators placed much blame on the home and parents. On the other hand, students tended to place the blame on teachers -- e.g., "personality conflicts with teachers" and "inability of some teachers to communicate well with students."
6. In the section of the survey for professional staff only some useful information was obtained --
   a) The staff saw the need for more rigorous enforcement of existing rules.
   b) Nearly half of the teachers and administrators expressed the need for help in improving their skills in dealing with discipline problems.
   c) Inservice on "effective classroom management techniques" was rated as #1 inservice need for teachers.

Project Objectives

On the basis of the needs assessment survey data and other formal and informal needs assessments done, we felt ready to prepare our plan for improving discipline. At this point we put together a broad-based Discipline Committee composed of 22 people. This planning committee included high school students, parents, principals, teachers, counselors and several central office administrators. Using all information available on the discipline situation in Springfield, the committee developed a set of project objectives and corresponding activities which it believed would lead to the desired improvement of student discipline. I will briefly describe the objectives of our project and the specific need(s) that led to adoption of each --

1. Revise the district's discipline code --

   The code had not been revised since 1973 and the committee believed it was time for a review to determine whether it reflected what we wanted in a code of student conduct. We suspected it needed some minor adjustments.

2. Establish greater consistency and uniformity in administering the discipline code --

   We discovered through our needs assessment and our suspension reports that there was a serious lack of uniformity and consistency in administering the discipline code in the district. Infractions in one school were frequently handled in a different manner than in another school. We also found that within the same school there were occasional inconsistencies in the way the code was being enforced. We decided that through the project we would develop procedures and guidelines which would assure a higher level of uniformity and consistency.

3. Develop effective means to communicate the discipline code and behavioral expectations to parents, students and faculty --

   We found that students, parents and even some teachers were not sure of their rights and responsibilities in discipline matters. Some people did not know the code of conduct or the consequences associated with discipline infractions. There was a need, therefore, to initiate an intensive effort to communicate to everyone affected by the discipline code -- students, parents, teachers, administrators, Board of Education members and the community at large.

4. Provide effective inservice training/staff development progress on school and classroom management procedures and techniques for teachers and administrators --

As mentioned earlier, our survey contained a section on inservice needs of staff. Most of our teachers and administrators perceived a need for improvement in their ability to cope with the problems of student discipline. This can probably be explained by the mere fact that those techniques and strategies which used to work for many of our teachers and principals were no longer effective with a growing number of students. Times had changed and overall student conduct had changed. One could no longer assume that if a student is told to behave that he/she would necessarily comply. For these and other reasons we established an objective to provide a program of inservice training for our staff to improve their skills in discipline procedures and effective classroom management.

5. Establish alternative strategies and programs for use with students who do not respond positively to traditional disciplinary procedures --

We found that some of our discipline consequences were ineffective and, in fact, some were counter-productive. A good example is out-of-school suspension. Many students would rather be on the streets than in school. While out of school during the period of suspension, students suffer from the loss of learning opportunities and the district loses badly needed revenues. The committee felt it was necessary to develop and implement some alternatives to procedures which were not productive in bringing about the desired change.

6. Integrate units of responsibility, values and law-focused education into the district's curriculum --

We believe that part of the problem we face with student behavior is a breakdown in values, in parenting and in the influence of traditional institutions which previously provided guidance to young people relative to acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. I am not sure what the school can do to accomplish what the home, church, family, neighborhood used to do in establishing and enforcing values and proper conduct but if we try, the curriculum is the place to make the effort.

7. Develop procedures which will enable district personnel to objectively and subjectively evaluate the effectiveness of the district's discipline program --

We perceived a need to incorporate into our project the collection of data at various points along the way to assess the effectiveness of the program. We wanted both a formative evaluation structure -- which would enable us to evaluate activities and make program adjustments as needs indicate -- and a summative evaluation structure which would permit outcome evaluation at the end of a specific period of time.

These were our program objectives. Due to the nature of the objectives, we are at different stages of completion. Some have been accomplished while others are in the development stages with no implementation plans scheduled until the next school year.

Implementation

At this point I would like to tell you what we have done to achieve these objectives and the progress we have made toward discipline improvement.

Objective #1 - Revision of the Discipline Code

Our work in this area has resulted in a few changes -- some very minor and others more significant --

a) Our responses to disciplinary infractions have been more clearly delineated -- this came about as a result of the need for more uniform administration of the code. More on this in a few minutes.

b) Banned smoking from our high schools -- anywhere on or adjacent to the campus.

c) Changed the corporal punishment procedures to permit only principals and assistant principals to administer such punishment.

Objective #2 - Uniformity and Consistency of Administering the Code

As I said earlier, inconsistency and lack of uniformity in administering the code have been serious problems. The old code was written in such a way as to allow for differing interpretations and it lacked specificity in the disciplinary actions corresponding to infractions. In our revision of the code we developed a four-level classification system which placed infractions at various levels by seriousness -- and listed the disciplinary procedures and consequences associated with those infractions. (Refer to pages 20-27 of the Faculty Handbook which display the four-level structure).

Objective #3 - Communicating the code and other discipline-related information to parents, students, staff and community

Basically we did this through -

a) News media

b) A public hearing

c) A meeting of the BOE

d) Handbook series

The latter, our handbook series, was the most effective communications medium. The handbooks, one each for parents, faculty, elementary students (K-6) and middle/high school students (7-12) contain rights, responsibilities, the classification system of infractions and consequences and other information of particular interest to each reference group. Samples are available to those interested. (Copies are available upon request).

Objective #4 - Staff Inservice

Staff inservice was perhaps the most critical element of our plan. We were convinced that without an effective program of staff development and inservice training our chances of success were very small indeed. The discipline committee looked at several models for discipline inservice before deciding which would be most appropriate. Our investigation led us to two approaches which we adopted for Springfield:

a) Elementary -- OUNCE Classroom Management Program -- a Title IVC validated program from Sarasota, Florida. OUNCE is a 30 week program of staff development which uses training manuals and video tapes to teach classroom management skills.

b) Middle and high school -- used Lee Canter's Assertive Discipline approach. This is a take charge approach to student discipline. Canter's staff conducted a one-day workshop with all middle and high school staff in October.

Objective #5 - Alternative Programs

We were sure that some of our approaches to discipline were ineffective. Specifically, we were not getting the desired results from out-of-school suspension. Because many students preferred out-of-school suspension to being in school it was not a deterrent. We also had students who were so disruptive that nothing we did seemed to work. For these reasons we developed some alternative procedures --

a) In-house suspension

b) Program for highly disruptive

c) Time-out room

(described on pages 56-59 of the Faculty Handbook)

Objective #6 - Curriculum Work in Responsibility and Law-Focused Education

One of our goals, as educators, is to prepare students to assume responsibility and to become effective citizens in a democratic society. The future of the nation depends upon how well we and other institutions (family, church, etc.) are able to accomplish this goal. Discipline problems indicate a failure to develop the sense of responsibility among students which we seek to achieve. A discipline program which focuses exclusively on corrective measures i.e., dealing with the problem after it has occurred -- will do little to enhance individual responsibility. Therefore, we incorporated into our program an effort to develop an understanding and appreciation for the rights of others and a[illegible]ance of responsibility for decent, ethical behavior. Thi[illegible]a big order but one which we will attempt to meet, in conjunction with others. A natural place

to work toward the attainment of this goal is through the curriculum. Some exploratory work is underway on law-focused units, group guidance activities on values development/clarification, and other programs which could become a part of the curriculum. Some of these programs will be piloted on a modest scale next year.

Objective #7 - Evaluation

Because we have made such a large commitment to discipline improvement we feel it is essential that we know how well we are succeeding, i,e., the degree to which progress is being made. We have incorporated into our project an evaluation component. Here are a few of the procedures we are using to evaluate the program:

a) Survey used for needs assessment and baseline data -- to be readministered in April or May (See copy of survey results).

b) Mid-year survey pulling a few items off of the larger survey (See copy of the results).

c) Suspensions and expulsions data.

d) Attendance and dropout data.

e) Referral and Report Form -- we developed a form for collecting referral data which allows us to keep track of types of infractions and the types of corrective measures taken, where and when the infraction occurred, referral source, etc. (See page 62 of Faculty Handbook). We get a computer printout for each school, each level and for the entire district each month. The information is shared with principals and central office personnel.

We believe we have a reasonably accurate picture of what is happening in the area of student discipline in the schools. We also have a good start on the collection of baseline data for future comparative analyses.

Midyear Report of Progress

These are the things we have done to improve discipline in Springfield. Now the important questions -- "How is it working?" "What are the results of these efforts made to improve discipline in the Springfield schools?" "What are the successes, and the failures?"

I must begin this part of the presentation by saying that we have made very substantial progress. We have, in most areas, obtained the results we had anticipated by mid-year. There have been a few disappointments, however, and I will share those with you as I discuss our progress.

1. The changes made in the discipline code have been reasonably successful. The smoking ban has worked beyond our expectations. We have effectively eliminated nearly all smoking on or around the high schools. This has reduced litter, reduced tardiness and we are no longer contributing to a habit that is harmful to health.

   The change in the code concerning who is authorized to administer corporal punishment has met with some resistance but I think it has been a step in the right direction. There is more control on the use of this controversial disciplinary procedure and the likelihood of litigation has been reduced.

2. The development of the four-level classification system (pages 20-27 of the Faculty Handbook) has been a big help in achieving uniformity and consistency. It sets parameters for interpreting and administering the code and establishes limits without tying the hands of the teacher or administrator. The structure allows discretion based upon the unique circumstances of each discipline situation.
3. Our efforts to communicate the code have been quite effective. We have received good press and TV coverage but the most effective technique has been the handbook series. Parents, students and faculty have developed an awareness of the code of conduct, rights and responsibilities, the four-level classification system, and other elements of the program that would have been impossible to communicate in any other way.

   The orientation to the discipline code and the contents of the handbooks took several forms. Elementary students spent about 30 minutes per day for a week going through their handbooks. A brief quiz was administered on the last day. Middle and high school students spent two periods in homeroom or class group meetings in reviewing their handbooks. Principals were given two days of inservice on the discipline program with the handbook used as a resource document. Teachers had a one-day workshop with some time devoted to a section by section handbook review. Informal evaluations suggest that the orientation and inservice efforts to develop knowledge of the discipline code, rights, responsibilities, etc. have been effective.

4. The results of the staff inservice program have been mixed. We are very pleased with the elementary inservice -- the OUNCE Classroom Management Program which has been implemented in half of our elementary schools this year. We are seeing changes in both student and teacher behavior. The reports from principals and teachers have been very positive.

   The Assertive Discipline program used at the middle and high levels is a good approach but does not have the depth that we need. It is a one-shot inservice with no follow-up. We are looking at some ways to reinforce Assertive Discipline with a maintenance program. Some preliminary discussions have been held with Lee Canter on this matter and he has expressed interest in working with us.

5. The system of alternatives --

   a) In-house suspension program has the support of all high school staff. It has helped us keep students in school while serving suspensions. The benefits are several. Students are under very close supervision at all times, they are engaged in learning, punishment is being administered through the loss of privileges and social contact and there is no loss of state aid. We know it is working because the kids intensely dislike it and the return rate is very low.

   b) We have not been able to put the in-house suspension program in at all of our middle schools but may do so next year. It currently operates in the three

high schools and one middle school.

c) The program for highly disruptive students has not yet materialized due to funding and facilities but we are exploring some options and feel that we can implement a program on a modest scale in the near future.

d) The time-out room concept has been effective where it has been used. Some teachers and principals do not want to use it and we are not inclined to force the issue.

6. Something that developed outside the original plan was what we call the "School Discipline Committee." One of our planning subcommittees received information on this concept from Indianapolis and Cincinnati. "School Discipline Committees" are composed of teachers, students, (where appropriate) and parents from a school. The committee meets periodically to review problems of the school and to develop plans to deal with those problems. They cannot operate outside the framework of the district discipline code but are given latitude to deal with the unique discipline problems of the school. (See pages 49-54 of the Faculty Handbook for guidelines).

The "School Discipline Committees" are working very well at the middle and high schools. The elementary schools do not appear to have the same need for such committees and some principals at the elementary level would prefer to disband their committees.

7. Another project outcome that pleases us has been the public relations value of our effort to improve discipline. People are supportive of what we are doing. Parents have been impressed, the community is behind us and the staff has expressed its strong support for the no-nonsense approach to dealing with student misbehavior.

8. We recently conducted a mid-year survey to obtain perceptual data from the same groups surveyed last spring. The survey was an abbreviated version of the original. Although I cannot report all of the results, some of the findings are worth discussing. The first question asked students, parents, teachers and administrators their perceptions of student discipline this year as compared to last. A majority of all groups reported discipline is "better than last year" with approximately three-fourths of the teachers and administrators selecting this response option. Among these items dealing with "effectiveness of current discipline procedures," the in-house suspension program, individual counseling parent and student conferences, withdrawal of privileges and student orientation programs (covering rules, policies and regulations) were rated as "most effective" by the four respondent groups. Detention, transfers, and demerit systems were rated as "least effective."

On the whole we are quite pleased with our progress toward improving discipline but do have concerns in several areas. I have already shared some of these with you -- such as the middle and high school inservice, the school discipline committees and one of our

proposed alternative programs. I would like to discuss several others because I think they have relevance beyond our situation.

1. Initially, our suspensions went up rather than down -- a disturbing fact in view of our goal to reduce suspensions. Our principals feel this is a natural consequence of the renewed emphasis on discipline and the uniform and consistent enforcement of the discipline code. I hope they are right.

2. Some staff members have used the discipline program as an excuse to "crack the whip" on misbehaving students. We predicted some of this would occur among those who have little tolerance or patience with children and youth. Fortunately, reports of excessive punitiveness have been relatively few.

3. Another prediction which proved to be accurate was that some people would not change -- no matter what. Some teachers and principals are resistant to any efforts to help them function more effectively. Our discipline program and the inservice activities that have accompanied its implementation have made no impact on such people.

Conclusions and Generalizations

What I have reported to you this afternoon is based on six months of program operation. Despite the short time since implementation, however, there are some conclusions that can be drawn and some generalizations to be made concerning our discipline improvement program.

1. I think it is safe to say that the persistent, serious and frustrating problem of student discipline can be

effectively addressed by school districts like mine. At least on a short term basis, some positive changes can be made through a large-scale effort to improve discipline.

2. We have found there is tremendous support for a program to improve discipline. Parents, teachers, administrators and even students will rally behind efforts to establish and strictly enforce reasonable standards of student conduct.

3. The community wants and appreciates the school district's discipline improvement program. This is one issue about which nearly all people agree. Some of our harshest critics have praised our effort to restore good discipline.

4. A strong program of orientation for students and staff (and inservice for staff) is, I believe, a necessary component of an effective discipline program.

5. Students have less difficulty in following rules and standards of appropriate conduct when the discipline code is enforced uniformly and consistently by teachers and administrators.

I am sure I could make other generalizations from our experience but these stand out.

Where do we go from here? How do we maintain the momentum that has been established over the past six months? These questions have been uppermost in our minds. Let me share with you some of our plans for the future.

1. As I mentioned earlier, the middle and high school program of intervention lacks sufficient intensity and depth. Discipline problems among this age group are symptoms of more deeply rooted problems -- poor achievement, low self-concept, negative attitudes toward school, etc. -- which often result in dropping-out before graduation.

   A Title IVC project proposal for funding a discipline/dropout prevention program at middle and high school levels is being written and will be submitted (with Board of Education approval) at the end of February.

2. The middle and high school inservice/staff development will be strengthened. Work is underway to modify the OUNCE Classroom Management Program to be applicable to middle and high school students and staff.

3. The district's discipline committee will review the referral summary reports for purposes of identifying frequency and types of discipline infractions and actions taken by school personnel. Analyses of these data may suggest some changes in discipline procedures, areas for needed inservice and modifications in the discipline code.

4. A study of the School Discipline Committee concept will be reviewed to determine its value and future.

5. Follow-up studies of OUNCE schools will be initiated to determine the impact of OUNCE on student conduct in the elementary schools.

6. The original discipline survey administered last April and May will be readministered each year to assess changes in perceptions of teachers, parents, students and administrators toward all aspects of the discipline problem.
7. Units of responsibility and law-focused education will be pilot tested in selected schools and classrooms during 1980-81.
8. Expand the OUNCE Classroom Management Program into all elementary schools in 1980-81.

Summary

I will conclude my presentation by offering some suggestions to those of you who may be considering discipline improvement projects in your own communities.

1. If you plan to develop a program of discipline improvement, do it on a fairly large scale. Get lots of people involved -- parents and students as well as staff.
2. Make it a top priority for your district. Let everyone know that discipline improvement is considered by the Board and administration as one of the most important activities of the district.
3. Leadership for discipline improvement must come from the top. Certainly, responsibilities can be delegated but continued monitoring and overt indications of interest, enthusiasm and support from the Board and Superintendent are vital to success.

4. I suggest the development of a plan based on objectives, implementation activities and evaluation. Our model may or may not be the best or the most appropriate for you. But some type of plan which will serve as a blueprint for action and as a way to communicate with those who matter is needed.

I could offer a lot of other tips but these are the important ones it seems to me.

I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you to discuss our discipline improvement program. I am very excited about some of the good things that have happened in Springfield as a result of our efforts and if I have been able to give you any ideas that you can take home our time has been well spent.

I have tried not to present myself as someone with all the answers or solutions to the discipline problems in the schools. What I have tried to do is convey the message that I believe we have within our power the ability to successfully address one of our most serious problems -- student discipline. It has been well worth the effort to those of us in my school district.